DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 390 CS 501 933

AUTHOR McCombs, Maxwell E.
TITLE Expanding the Domain of Agenda-Setting Research Strategies for Theoretical Development.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (63rd, Washington, D.C., December 1-4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Literature Reviews; *Mass Media; *News Media; *Political Issues; *Public Opinion; Research Methodology; *Research Opportunities; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS *Agenda Setting

ABSTRACT

This review of the research into the agenda-setting function of mass communications posits a structure of the agenda-setting process in order to (1) organize the existing research literature in a coherent fashion and (2) identify the gaps in our existing knowledge of the agenda-setting function of the press. Major sections of the paper discuss the difference between the concept and the theory of agenda-setting, the concept of agenda-setting, measuring the agenda-setting influence, the theory of agenda-setting, research strategies, suggested priorities in further work, and the applicability of the concept to research in other mass communication settings. (AA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED149390

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Expanding the Domain of Agenda-Setting Research

Strategies for Theoretical Development

Maxwell E. McCombs

Communications Research Center

School of Public Communication

Syracuse University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maxwell E. McCombs

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS501933

An invited paper for the Mass Communication Division of the Speech Communication Association. Washington, DC, December 1977.

The basic idea of an agenda-setting function of mass communication has been around for a long time. Recall that the opening chapter of Walter Lippmann's 1922 classic, Public Opinion, is entitled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." As Lippmann eloquently asserted, it is the mass media which influence the construction of these pictures in our heads through their selection of news and information about the outside world.

But like much of our folk wisdom about mass communication and public opinion, this idea that the press influences the focus of public opinion was not put to empirical test for nearly a half century. The first empirical evidence came from McCombs and Shaw's (1972) examination during the 1968 Presidential election of the correlations between the issues emphasized in the mass media and the issues perceived as important by voters. Here was the first hard evidence that the issues of the press over time become the issues of the public. Following that initial evidence that the press plays a major role in telling the public what to think about, what to consider as the priority issues of the day, this intriguing idea of an agenda-setting function of the media has generated a large number of studies.

This new area of inquiry moved communication researchers away from their long-standing concern with attitudes and short-term attitude change toward consideration of the long-term cognitive impact of mass communication.

Hewing close to the metaphorical label for this idea, the early agenda-setting research examined the match between the agenda of issues purveyed by the press and the agenda of issues considered priority by the public.

But the rapid proliferation of studies quickly outgrew this original conceptual domain. Later studies began to consider the attributes of a single issue, examining the match between the array of detail presented by the press and the picture of an issue held by the public. Cohen (1975), for example, found significant correspondence between newspaper coverage of the facets of a local environmental issue and the image of that issue among local residents.

Moving entirely beyond issues per se, more recent research has applied the concept of agenda-setting to candidate images (the match between attributes which are salient in voters' images of those candidates) and to the salience of politics overall on each individual's larger agenda of concerns.

But even before the research moved into all these new conceptual domains of agenda-setting, McCombs' bibliographic essay in the Summer 1976 issue of Political Communication Review covered more than two dozen articles organized into seven broad categories. That was the growth pattern only four years after publication of the original McCombs and Shaw study. Since that growth is continuing, there is a major need for a more formal conceptual and theoretical statement about the agenda-setting function of mass communication.

The conceptual and theoretical statement to be presented here, outlining the structure of the agenda-setting process, will serve two major

purposes:

a) to organize the existing research literature in a coherent fashion;

b) to identify the gaps in our existing knowledge of the agenda-setting function of the press.

The major corollary of this second function is that this conceptual map will enable researchers planning new studies to identify the critical areas where new data will make the maximum contribution to our understanding of agenda-setting and mass communication. A classic function of any theory is to guide our observations to those points yielding the greatest payoffs and opening the most significant new vistas.

Concept and Theory

Part of the difficulty in intellectually assimilating the variety of agenda-setting studies now in the literature, even when they are grouped into general categories as they were in the Political Communication Review essay, is that we now have an apples and oranges mix of studies. While some studies test the basic concept of an agenda-setting function of mass communication, others assume this relationship and/or go beyond it to link agenda-setting with other variables. These latter studies represent the first connected pieces in a larger jigsaw puzzle that we might label a theory of agenda-setting. So on the one hand, we have a concept of agenda-setting, which is itself a hypothesis, and we also have a larger theory of agenda-setting. Our task here is to spell out the individual variables that define the concept of agenda-setting and that outline the emerging theory of agenda-setting.

Concept of Agenda-Setting

The concept of agenda-setting asserts a positive relationship between what is emphasized in the mass media and what members of the audience come to regard as important. In other words, the salience of a topic in the mass media influences the salience of that topic among the audience. Agenda-setting asserts that audiences learn these saliences from the mass media.

The agenda-setting function of mass communication is a relational concept specifying a strong positive relationship between the emphases of mass communication and the salience of these topics to the individuals in the audience. This concept is stated in causal terms: increased salience of a topic or issue in the mass media influences (causes) the salience of that topic or issue among the public. In short, the basic concept of an agenda-setting function of mass communication is itself a two-variable hypothesis.

The conceptual development and operationalization of these two variables defining the basic concept of agenda-setting introduces the first bits of complexity.

Media Agenda. While most researchers have used quite straightforward content analysis to define the agenda of the mass media, there is the question of which mass media to include in each study. Most studies, interested in the general idea of agenda-setting, have used a mix of media. Obviously, the favorites have been television and newspapers because these are the dominant mass communication channels for news.

At first, television and newspapers were used in tandem as simply two major news outlets. But recent work has begun to outline distinct agenda-

setting roles for television and newspapers. For example, Shaw and McCombs (1977) report data indicating a major agenda-setting role on political issues for newspapers and only a minor role for TV. Other recent work (McCombs and Weaver, 1977) suggests a different role for the two media in their influence on the position of political interest on each voter's agenda during an election year. In other words, television and newspapers are not simple replicates of each other. Distinct hypotheses about the influence of the mass media are emerging for each medium.

Public Agenda. While there has been consensus among researchers on the measurement of media agendas, there has been considerable disagreement over both the conceptualization and measurement of the public agenda. Much of the discussion has centered on the distinction between the intra-personal agenda (usually operationalized in terms of what the individual considers personally most salient) and the inter-personal agenda (usually operationalized in more overtly behavioral terms of what the individual talks about most often with others).

While there is considerable overlap between the intra-personal and inter-personal agendas (McCombs, 1974), there are enough differences to warrant using both concepts as distinct variables at this stage in the development of agenda-setting research. It is not clear at all, for example, whether each personal agenda has a similar relationship with each of the media agendas or with each of the other variables that will be discussed subsequently in this paper.

There also is a third conceptualization of the public agenda: the perceived community agenda (McLeod et al., 1974; Noelle-Neumann, 1977). This concept moves away from an individual agenda to the perceived reality of what is on the community agenda. Since the news media are a major source

of surveillance, both for citizens in their casual day-by-day scanning of the environment and for scholars and public officials interested in assessing the public mind, this third conceptualization of the public agenda seems especially pertinent to the idea of an agenda-setting function of mass communication.

Measuring the Agenda-Setting Influence

So far we have spoken simply of agenda-setting without specifying the nature of the relationship between the mass media agenda and the public agenda. But there are at least three different ways to describe the agenda-setting influence (Shaw and McCombs, 1977).

The simplest version is the 0/1 or awareness model. Here the statement is simply one of awareness versus ignorance. This basic, primitive notion of agenda-setting is a truism. If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agendas.

However, the concept of agenda-setting as it has been empirically developed urges a more detailed model: 0/1/2...N, namely that among the many topics or attributes transmitted by the media, the same order of priorities will be transferred from the media agenda to the individual's agenda. In short, we judge as important what the media judge important. The media's priorities become our own.

Now there is, of course, a very finite limit to how far this priorities model can be extended. A lengthy set of media priorities--say a dozen or more topics--is unlikely to be directly translated into a similarly ranked set of priorities by the audience. Somewhere around five, six, or seven is the likely cutoff point for this 0/1/2...N model of agenda-setting.

Intermediate between the 0/1 awareness and the 0/1/2...N priorities model is an agenda-setting effect we might label salience. This is the 0/1/2 model. According to this model, heavy media emphasis on an issue or topic can move it above threshold and into the top ranks of the personal agendas of the audience. This occurs only for a few items constantly emphasized in the media. This version of agenda-setting extends beyond sheer simple awareness. A discrimination is made by the audience as to high and low importance items, but the exact priorities of the media are not reproduced within personal agendas.

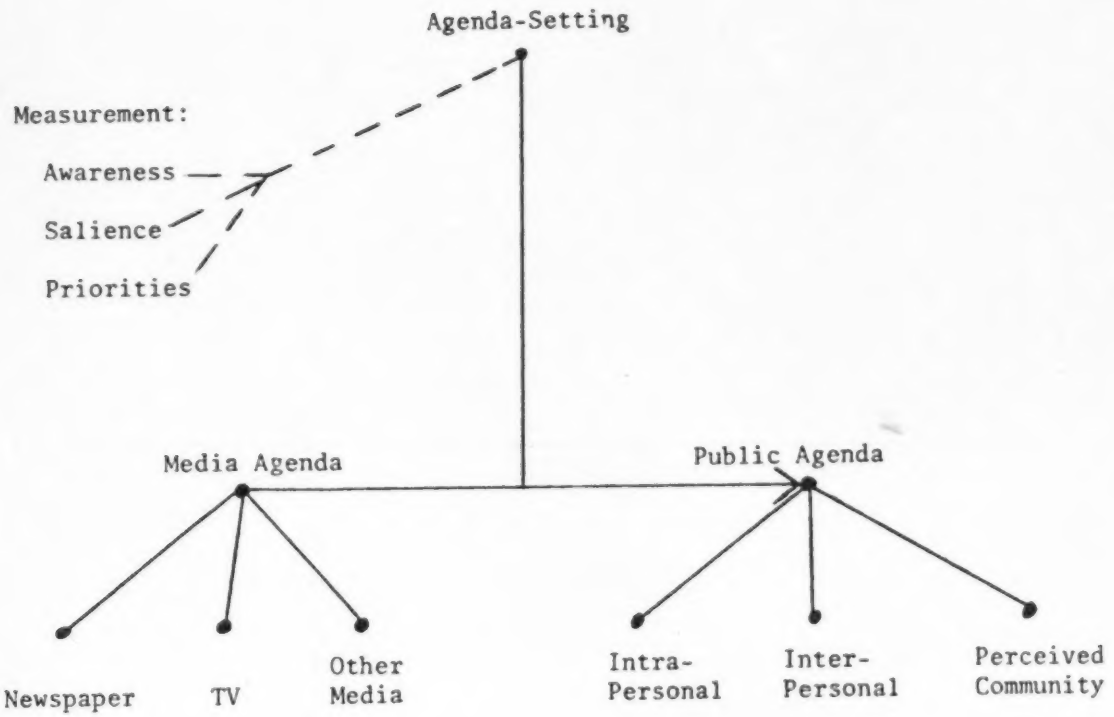
So there is a range of agenda-setting models to describe and measure the relationships between media agendas and public agendas. To date most of the research has used the priorities model. But considerable work remains to be done in explicating the conditions under which each model is most appropriate.

Theory of Agenda-Setting

The basic concept of agenda-setting outlined in Figure 1 can be placed in a larger behavioral context. Indeed, it can be placed in a number of contexts which begin to define various theories of the agenda-setting role of the mass media. Here three such contexts will be examined:

- o The context of other variables upon which the potency of the agenda-setting effect is contingent. In other words, the contingent conditions for agenda-setting define a behavioral theory of the agenda-setting role of the mass media.
- o The context of conceptual domains in which this behavioral theory of agenda-setting can be applied. For example, recent research (Becker and McCombs, 1977) has considered the influence

Figure 1: Concept of Agenda-Setting



of the press on the perceived agenda of candidates just as the original line of research considered the influence of the press on an agenda of issues.

- o The context of subject matter or substantive domains to which the theory of agenda-setting can be applied. While the vast majority of the research to date has applied the notion of agenda-setting to political communication, a few studies (e.g., Cohen, 1975) have considered other types of news and its effects on public behavior and suggestions have been outlined for using the idea of agenda-setting in the study of developmental communication in the Third World (McCombs, 1976).

Contingent Conditions. One of the major frontiers now under exploration is specification of the contingent conditions which limit or enhance the agenda-setting influence of the mass media. No one contends that agenda-setting is an all-powerful effect of the mass media reminiscent of the old hypodermic theory of mass communication. Agenda-setting effects have been demonstrated, but they are not of consistent and major magnitude in all circumstances.

Two variables shown to influence the magnitude of the agenda-setting effect are the amount of media exposure (McCombs and Shaw, 1974) and the level of need for orientation (Weaver, 1977). These two variables--how often an individual has actually been exposed to a medium's agenda and the individual's level of perceived need for information--both account for individual variations in the strength of the agenda-setting effect. Such variables begin to define a theory of agenda-setting, placing the basic concept of agenda-setting in its behavioral context. There are many more variables to be considered and empirically mapped.

For example, the empirical evidence to date on the relationship between interpersonal communication and the strength of the agenda-setting effect is quite mixed. Some data suggest a conflict model, that the agenda of the mass media is countered by the agenda of the peer group. Other data demonstrate just the opposite, facilitation of the media's agenda-setting influence as a result of extensive interpersonal communication. Clearly, the exact relationship between mass and interpersonal communication--a question long preceding agenda-setting research--needs to be resolved.

Conceptual Domains. The concept of agenda-setting is not limited to the relationship between the salience of topics in the mass media and the salience of those topics to members of the audience. In addition to providing cues about the salience of topics--objects, if you will--the mass media also differentiate between the saliency of various attributes of these topics or objects. Not every attribute of a person, issue, idea, or event in the news is considered newsworthy. Even among those attributes selected for mention in the news, all clearly are not accorded equal treatment. Just as the objects in the news have different saliences, the attributes of those objects also have different saliences. Benton and Frazier (1976) and Cohen (1975) have demonstrated that the influence of the mass media on the perceived salience of attributes of issues in the news is equal to its influence in placing the issues themselves on the public agenda.

Consideration of agenda-setting in terms of the saliences of both objects and their attributes subsumes several similar ideas found in the communication literature. The concepts of status-conferral, image-making and stereotyping all concern the salience of objects and/or attributes.

Just as the original metaphor of an agenda of objects has been extended to embrace an agenda of attributes for an object, the metaphor of an agenda of issues has been extended in recent research to include candidates (Becker and McCombs, 1977) and politics in general (McCombs and Weaver, 1977) as agenda items.

Translating research strategies and hypotheses based on an array of issues to a focus on an array of candidates is straightforward. Such a translation and extension puts to empirical test the popular notion that the press determines the front-runners in the out-of-power party's process of selecting its Presidential contender.

The original idea of an agenda of issues and the modification expressed in the idea of an agenda of candidates both maintain the concept of an agenda-setting function of the press as a central part of political communication. But political communication is just one small segment of the communication spectrum. For most Americans, politics occupies center stage, if at all, during a few brief weeks each election year.

To continue our metaphor, politics is just one item on the larger agenda of personal concerns. For most persons it is found high on the personal agenda only for a short time during election year. Perhaps a key political role of the press, indeed, a key agenda-setting role, is the movement of politics onto the agenda and up to a prominent position during election year.

To sum up, the agenda-setting influence of the press can be examined for three kinds of agenda items: public issues, political candidates, and politics <u>per se</u>. For the first two, both an array of objects (the issues or the candidates themselves), or an array of the attributes of one of these objects can be the subject of agenda-setting research. This is a

total of five distinct domains for the concept of agenda-setting. Strictly, speaking these five domains are additional elaborations of the basic concept. But they have been included here in the section on theory because the full nexus of variables defining the agenda-setting role of the press should be considered in research on these domains.

Substantive Domains. Almost all of the agenda-setting research in its brief five-year history has concentrated on political communication during election campaigns. Since this is the oldest, continuing field of research within mass communication, dating from at least the 1940 Erie County study, it is an appropriate locus for work on agenda-setting. However, the time is at hand for extending the concept of agenda-setting and its theoretical elaborations to non-campaign settings. In itself this would be a valuable contribution to the field of political communication, which is heavily concentrated on election studies.

But there also are opportunities to apply both the concept and theory of agenda-setting in realms outside political communication. For example, agenda-setting can be applied to developmental communication (McCombs, 1976). In operational terms, developmental communication means introducing new social, health, agricultural, and industrial practices to a traditionally-oriented population. In short, it means the introduction of a major new social agenda to replace a long-standing agenda of social practices and priorities.

Also in the field of international communication, the concept of agenda-setting is being used to organize research into the often-asserted idea of cultural imperialism (McCombs, 1976a). Agenda-setting helps frame some key, empirically testable questions about the impact of alien mass communication on an indigenous population. From the perspective of

cultural imperialism, one would hypothesize that the agendas, both political and cultural, of audiences heavily exposed to alien mass communication would be influenced and would differ from the agendas resulting from use of local communication materials.

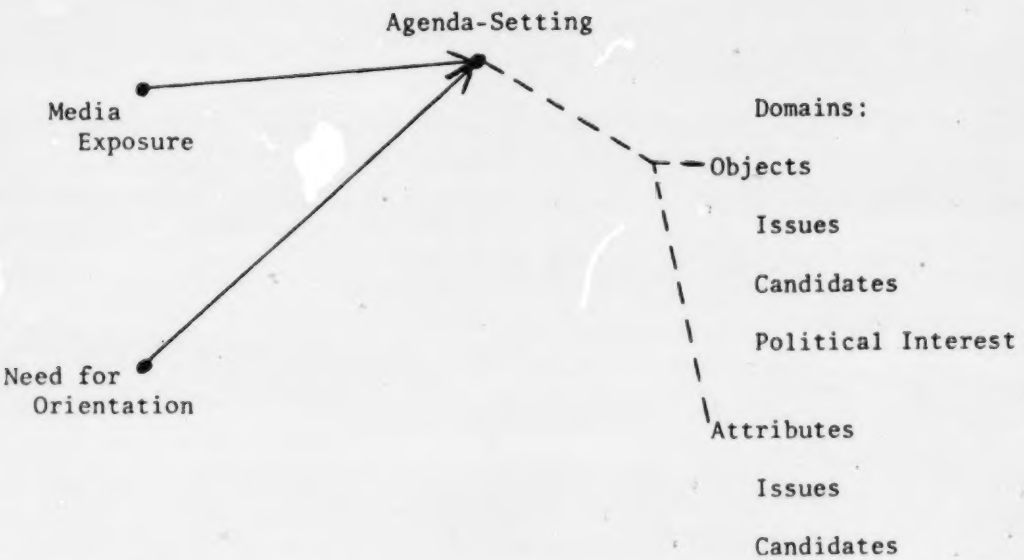
In yet another traditional area of mass communication research, the concept of agenda-setting can be used to guide gatekeeping research. Just as the basic agenda-setting concept describes the transfer of items from a mass media agenda to an audience agenda, it also can describe the transfer of items from one medium agenda to another. For example, to what extent do the wire services set the agenda of local news outlets? In the original gatekeeping research the focus was on the gatekeeper and his attitudes, beliefs, and personal characteristics. Agenda-setting shifts this focus to institutional variables and the extent to which external factors influence the final news product transmitted to the audience.

To sum up, the idea of an agenda-setting function of mass communication has application to a number of areas other than political communication. Indeed, one of the exciting aspects of research based on this concept is the integration of a number of long-standing mass communication concerns within a single conceptual framework. Continued pursuit of these lines of agenda-setting research will reveal whether the integration simply results from parallel metaphors or from theoretical integration at a higher level of abstraction.

Research Strategies

Figures 1 and 2 summarize the idea of agenda-setting as it has emerged piecemeal over the past five years. The goal here has been to integrate those pieces, to provide an overview for researchers interested in pursuing

Figure 2: Theory of Agenda-Setting



this line of inquiry. While fresh research is likely to yield yet additional variables and concepts for Figures 1 and 2, it is time to pursue this mapping in a systematic fashion. The approach to date, typical of most mass communication research, has produced a shotgun pattern of findings. Additional scattered findings will not be that useful, but more attention to systematic inquiry will be.

Two quite different research strategies can be used to organize systematic investigation of the agenda-setting function of mass communication. They are:

- o Matrix building approach
- o Hypothetico-deductive method.

While the hypothetico-deductive method is the textbook model, the matrix building approach is the modal pattern in most social science research.

To illustrate the matrix approach, consider the nine variables listed in Figure 1: three types of media agendas, three types of personal agendas, and three measurement models. These nine variables (ignoring other relevant agenda-setting variables listed in Figure 2) define a matrix with 36 cells above the diagonal, each cell a bivariate relationship between two of these nine variables. Some of these cells have been documented empirically, for example, the relationship between intra-personal and inter-personal agendas (McCombs, 1974) and a comparison of the salience and priorities measurement models (Shaw and McCombs, 1977). But the majority of these bivariate relationships have never been empirically examined.

Each of these empty cells represents a research opportunity, a chance to add an important bit of data to the literature on agenda-setting. In fact, every cell represents such an opportunity because of the need for

replication. If the usual pattern of research prevails, many different investigators will gradually fill in these various cells in the matrix. Matrix building, the slow accretion of empirical evidence by numerous investigators, is the modal pattern of mass communication research. But it is a slow and hit-or-miss process which can be frustrating to those interested in the broad substantive questions about mass communication and public opinion raised by the idea of an agenda-setting function of mass communication.

For those who are frustrated by this potluck approach, the classical hypothetico-deductive method is recommended. Using this strategy, the scholar assumes--on the basis of logic, intuition, informed speculation, or creative insight--the basic outlines of the theory. Answers to the key questions raised by agenda-setting are tentatively sketched in. Then on the basis of this conjecture those hypothetical relationships which appear to be most important are asserted as hypotheses and put to empirical test. The matrix is being filled in, but on a highly selective basis.

In place of ths slow and unpatterned exploration of the matrix characterized by the matrix building approach, the hypothetico-deductive approach attempts to creatively and insightfully speed up the appearance of comprehensive theory by spotlighting--and gambling, if you will--on a few key elements. Matrix building is a conservative, but sure, strategy that will pay off in time if enough scholars persist. The alternative is a more venturesome strategy that runs the risk of very small dividends for the intellectual effort made, but offers the excitement and allure of major advances in our understanding of mass communication and public opinion.

Some Suggested Priorities

Both research strategies can produce useful additions to our knowledge of both the concept of agenda-setting and the broader theory of agenda-setting. But which strategy and which goal, mapping the concept or the theory, should receive priority?

As to research strategy, the choice between matrix building and the hypothetico-deductive method is primarily a matter of personal style. Some investigators feel more comfortable with one approach than with the other. To some extent also, the choice between mapping the concept of agenda-setting and building a broad social theory with agenda-setting as one of its central concepts is a matter of style and personal interest. But here I will offer a suggestion.

Until the concept of agenda-setting is fully mapped, the builder of broad social theory must make a critical decision in designing each particular piece of research. On the one hand, a simplifying assumption can be made about the nature of agenda-setting and only one, or a limited number of, operational definitions used. For example, a project might measure only the intra-personal agenda, matching it with a content analysis of two newspapers.

Proceeding this way makes life much simpler logistically, but runs the risk of not finding significant relationships between agenda-setting and other variables due to the fact that the wrong conceptualization of agenda-setting was employed. On the other hand, to laboriously include a large number of the possible measures of public and media agendas adds a major logistical burden to any research project.

In short, construction of broad social theory built around the concept of agenda-setting can proceed more efficiently once the basic nature of the agenda-setting concept per se is reasonably well known. For this reason, my recommendation for priority research is exploration of the basic nature of the agenda-setting process. Once a well-established, parsimonious map exists of the agenda-setting concept, fruitful theory building can proceed at a much more rapid and steady pace.

Research Settings

This exploration of the basic nature of the agenda-setting need not be restricted to studies of issue agendas, the original domain of agenda-setting, nor restricted to studies of the other political communication domains previously described here--e.g., issue attributes, candidate images, and salience of politics.

The ultimate fascination of the agenda-setting concept is its applicability to a wide variety of mass communication settings. Virtually all of the research to date has considered agenda-setting at the mass media/audience interface, the transfer of saliences from the mass media to their audiences.

But agenda-setting equally applies to the interfaces within the mass media and between the mass media and their external news sources. Within the mass media, for example, to what extent do the wire services set the agenda of local news outlets? One also can empirically explore the journalistic folk wisdom that major newspapers in New York, Washington, and regional metropolitan centers set the agenda for television news and for smaller newspapers.

Beyond the mass media systems, which institutions in the community and nation are the dominant agenda-setters for the press? What kinds of news inputs have a major influence on the ultimate concerns of public opinion?

Overall, that is the basic question about this entire process of how salience is transferred from one party to another: What kinds of news inputs, shaped by what characteristics of news sources, news agencies, and mass communication audiences, have a major influence on the public agenda?

References

Becker, Lee and Maxwell McCombs (1977) "U.S. Primary Politics and Public Opinion: The Role of the Press in Determining Voter Reactions." Presented to International Communication Association. West Berlin, Germany.

Benton, Marc and P.J. Frazier (1976) "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media at Three Levels of Information Holding," Communication Research 3:261-274.

Cohen, David (1975) "A Report on a Non-Election Agenda-Setting Study." Paper presented to Association for Education in Journalism. Ottawa, Canada.

Lippmann, Walter (1922) Public Opinion. New York: Macmillian.

McCombs, Maxwell (1974) "A Comparison of Intra-Personal and Inter-Personal Agenda of Public Issues." Paper presented to the International Communication Association. New Orleans.

_____ (1976a) "Elaborating the Agenda-Setting Influence of Mass Communication," Bulletin of the Institute for Communication Research, Keio University. Tokyo, Japan. No.7.

_____ (1976b) "Empirical Findings on the Impact of International Communication." Presented at the East-West Center. Honolulu, Hawaii.

McCombs, Maxwell and Donald Shaw (1972) "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," Public Opinion Quarterly 36:176-187.

_____ (1974) "A Progress Report on Agenda-Setting Research." Presented to Association for Education in Journalism. San Diego, Calif.

McCombs, Maxwell and David Weaver (1977) "Voters and the Mass Media: Information-Seeking, Political Interest, and Issue Agendas." Presented to American Association for Public Opinion Research. Buck Hill Falls, Pa.

McLeod, Jack, Lee Becker, and J.E. Byrnes. (1974) "Another Look at the Agenda-Setting Function of the Press," Communication Research 1:143-158.

References (continued)

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth (1977) "Turbulences in the Climate of Opinion; Methodological Applications of the Spiral of Silence Theory," Public Opinion Quarterly 41:143-158.

Shaw, Donald and Maxwell McCombs (1977) The Emergence of American Political Issues. The agenda-setting function of the press. St. Paul: West Publishing Co.

Weaver, David (1977) "Political Issues and Voter Need for Orientation," Chapter 7 in Shaw and McCombs, 1977.